

from INTO THIN AIR

Based on the magazine article by John Krakauer



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Standing on the top of Mount Everest, I stared dully at the huge curve of earth below. I knew that it was a spectacular sight, but I was too worn-out to care. I had not slept in fifty-seven hours and the oxygen in my tank was low. **A**

I took four quick photos of my climbing partners, then started down. After a few steps, I noticed clouds to the south. They looked no different from the harmless puffy clouds that rose from the valley every day. **B**

10 Later, people would ask why climbers had not paid attention to the warning signs. I saw nothing that afternoon that suggested that a murderous storm was coming swiftly toward us.

After fifteen minutes of very careful shuffling along a seven-thousand-foot drop-off, I arrived at the notorious¹ Hillary Step, named after the first Westerner to climb the mountain. Thirty feet below, three climbers were pulling themselves up the rope, and there were twenty people waiting their turn.

1. Someone who is **notorious** (NOH TAWR EE UHS) is well known because of something bad.

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A HERE'S HOW

Reading Focus

The author does not seem very excited that he has reached the top of Mount Everest. I think the **cause** of his lack of excitement is that he is very tired and low on oxygen.

B HERE'S HOW

Literary Focus

I know this story ends with disaster, but the author has not gotten to that yet. So far the **mood** is fairly relaxed.

A YOUR TURN

Reading Focus

What is the **effect** of Andy Harris accidentally releasing the last of the author's oxygen?

B HERE'S HOW

Language Coach

Sometimes I can figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word by looking at **context clues**. For example, I am not sure what *mumbled* means in line 25. However, after I read the rest of the sentence, I think *mumbled* means "spoke quietly and unclearly."

C YOUR TURN

Literary Focus

As he recalls the events of the climb, the author uses some short sentences and some long ones. Why do you think he changes his **sentence structure** as he does?

D YOUR TURN

Reading Focus

What was the **cause** of Beck Weathers' poor vision at high altitudes?

Andy Harris, a guide with my team, came up behind me while I waited to go down. I asked him to turn off the valve² on my tank to save oxygen. Not meaning to, Harris opened the valve, and the last of my oxygen was gone. Now I would have to climb down the most unprotected ground on the entire route without oxygen. **A**

Near the end of the group climbing past me were two of my teammates: guide Rob Hall and Yasuko Namba. Doug Hansen—my closest friend while we were on the mountain—also arrived. He mumbled something that I couldn't hear, shook my hand weakly, and continued slowly upward. **B**

It was after 2:30 when I made it down to the South Summit. By now the weather did not look so benign.³ I grabbed a fresh oxygen tank, attached it to my breather,⁴ and hurried down into the gathering cloud. **C**

Four hundred feet behind me, where the summit⁵ was still in sunlight, my teammates were wasting time taking photos and giving high-fives. None of them suspected that on that day, every minute would count. **C**

When I reached the Balcony, about 4 P.M., I found Beck Weathers standing alone, shivering. Due to eye surgery, Weathers could not see at high altitudes. Hall had tried to send Weathers back down, but Weathers talked Hall into waiting to see if his vision⁶ improved. If not, Weathers would have to wait at 27,500 feet for Hall and the group to return. **D**

I tried to convince Weathers to come with me, but he decided to wait.

By 5:30, the storm was now a full blizzard.⁷ I was only two hundred feet above Camp Four, but I still had to climb down a bulge of rock-hard ice without a rope.

Suddenly, Harris stumbled out of the storm. His cheeks were coated with frost, one eye was frozen shut, and his speech

2. A **valve** (VALV) is a device that controls the flow of a gas, such as oxygen.

3. **Benign** (BIH NYN) means "mild; not harmful."

4. A **breather** (BREE THUHR) is a device for letting air out of a tank.

5. The **summit** (SUHM IHT) is the highest point.

6. **Vision** (VIHZH UHN): means "sense of sight."

7. A **blizzard** (BLIHZ UHRD) is a very cold, snowy storm.

was slurred. He desperately wanted to reach the tents and started scooting down the ice on his butt, facing forward. A second later
 50 he lost his grip and went rocketing down on his back.

Two hundred feet below, I could see Harris lying still. I was sure he'd broken at least a leg. Then, he stood up, waved, and stumbled toward camp. **E**

Twenty minutes later I was in my tent, the door zipped tight. I was safe. The others would be coming into camp soon. We'd climbed Mount Everest.

It would be many hours before I learned that everyone did not make it back to camp.

Hall and Hansen were still on the exposed summit ridge.
 60 Hall waited for over an hour for Hansen to reach the summit and return. Soon after they began their descent,⁸ Hansen ran out of oxygen and collapsed.⁹

At 4:31 p.m., Hall radioed Base Camp to say that he and Hansen were above the Hillary Step and needed oxygen. Two full bottles were waiting for them at the South Summit, but Harris, in his oxygen-starved confusion, overheard the radio call and broke in to tell Hall that all the bottles at the South Summit were empty. Hall stayed with Hansen at the top of the Hillary Step. **F**

There was no further word from Hall until the middle of the
 70 night. He finally reached the South Summit after twelve hours—it should have taken half an hour—but could no longer walk. When asked how Hansen was doing, Hall replied, "Doug is gone."

Late the following day, Hall was connected by radio to his wife in New Zealand. After a few minutes of conversation, Hall told his wife, "I love you. Please don't worry too much," and signed off. **G**

These were the last words anyone heard him say. Twelve days later, Hall was found lying in a shallow ice-hollow, his upper body buried under a drift of snow.

80 Hutchison and a team of Sherpas, the local guides from Nepal, set out to find the bodies of our teammates Weathers

E QUICK CHECK

Why is Andy Harris in such a rush to get down the mountain?

F YOUR TURN

Reading Focus

Underline the sentence explaining what **caused** Hall to stay with Hansen at Hillary Step.

G LITERARY ANALYSIS

Why do you think Rob Hall told his wife not to worry? Explain your answer.

8. A **descent** (DIH SEHNT) is a going down; a trip down.

9. **Collapsed** (KUH LAPSD) means "fell down."

A YOUR TURN

Reading Focus

What was the **effect** of Beck Weathers' severe frostbite?

B HERE'S HOW

Literary Focus

While the author's **mood** is sometimes relaxed, here it is serious again. This is because he is talking about the people who died that day on the mountain.

C HERE'S HOW

Vocabulary

I do not recognize the word *ascent*, but my dictionary defines it as "upward movement" or "the act of climbing." Both definitions seem reasonable, but the second one makes more sense for this sentence.



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and Namba. Both were found barely alive, covered in thick ice. Hutchison asked Lhakpa Chhiri's advice. Lhakpa Chhiri, a veteran guide respected by everyone for his knowledge of the mountain, urged Hutchison to leave Weathers and Namba where they lay. Trying to rescue them would jeopardize¹⁰ the lives of the other climbers. Hutchison decided that Chhiri was right.

Later that day, Beck Weathers lurched into camp, his horribly frostbitten right hand outstretched in a frozen salute, looking like a mummy in a horror film. A month later, a team of Dallas surgeons would amputate¹¹ Weathers's dead right hand just below the wrist. **A**

Until I climbed in the Himalayas, I'd never seen death at close range. And there was so much of it: Eleven men and women lost their lives on Everest in May 1996. (After Krakauer wrote this article, a twelfth death was discovered.) **B**

Climbing mountains will never be safe. Famous mountain climbers—especially Everest climbers—have always been those who took great risks and got away with it. When given a chance to reach the planet's highest point, people are quick to abandon caution completely. "Eventually," warns Tom Hornbein, thirty-three years after his ascent of Everest, "what happened this season is certain to happen again." **C**

10. **Jeopardize** (JEHP UHR DYZ) means "put in danger."

11. **Amputate** (AM PYUH TAYT): means "cut off a limb, such as an arm or a leg."